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Languages used for preparation of documents and publications of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

Note by the Secretariat

I. Introduction

1. At its forty-first session, the Committee for Programme and Coordination recommended that the Secretary-General submit to the General Assembly, at its fifty-sixth session, a report on the most appropriate ways to ensure that the documents and publications of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) were issued in Arabic, which is most relevant to the requirements of the member States of the region, as well as in other working languages of ESCWA so as to fulfil the requirements of readers outside the region as appropriate.[1]

2. In response to that request, the present report provides information on the current situation with regard to the use of Arabic and other languages for ESCWA documents and publications and indicates steps to be taken for improving their issuance in Arabic.

II. Background

3. The General Assembly, by its resolution 3190 (XXVIII) of 18 December 1973, decided that Arabic should become both an official and a working language of the Assembly and its main committees. Moreover, by its resolution 35/219 of 17 December 1980, the Assembly:

(a) Decided to include Arabic among the official and working languages of the subsidiary organs of the General Assembly, no later than 1 January 1982;

(b) Requested the Security Council to include Arabic among its official and working languages and the Economic and Social Council to include Arabic among its official languages, no later than 1 January 1983;

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(c) Amended rules 51, 52, 54 and 56 of its rules of procedure, concerning the official and working languages of the Assembly.

4. Additional clarifications regarding the use of the working languages of the Secretariat, especially at the regional commissions, have been provided in the Secretary-General's bulletins ST/SGB/201 of 8 July 1983 and ST/SGB/212 of 24 September 1985. In these bulletins, it was reiterated, inter alia, that: (a) every staff member is required to work in either English or French, which are the working languages of the Secretariat; and (b) since the regional commissions for Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean and Western Asia also have Russian, Spanish and Arabic, respectively, as a working language, individual staff members in the secretariats of these commissions may work in the respective language.

5. In accordance with rule 25 of article VII of the ESCWA Statute, Arabic, English and French are the working languages of the Commission. Rule 28 requires that all resolutions, recommendations and other formal decisions of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies, as well as the annual reports, should be published in the working languages. In its resolution 20 (II) of 9 May 1975,[2] the Commission:

(a) Decided that Arabic should be the original language in which all resolutions are drafted;

(b) Decided that all other technical and non-technical documents issued by the Commission should be translated into Arabic promptly and accurately, where the original was not in Arabic;

(c) Requested the Executive Secretary to take the necessary steps in all cases to ensure complete accuracy in the translation of those documents from and into the three working languages.

6. Moreover, in its resolution 44 (IV) of 28 April 1977,[3] the Commission decided that:

(a) All documents to be submitted to the Commission should, as far as possible, be drafted in Arabic;

(b) When making appointments to the posts in the Commission, given equal qualifications, preference should be given to those candidates with a good command of the Arabic language in addition to one of the other working languages of the United Nations, except in the case of experts, consultants and staff seconded to the Commission by the United Nations and its various organs.

III. Current situation

7. The ESCWA publication programme, indicating the languages of drafting and publication and the size and cost of each publication, has been submitted every biennium for the consideration and approval of the Publications Board which determines the policy on the preparation, production, distribution and sale of publications, as provided for in rules 110.38, 110.39 and 110.40 of the Financial Regulations and Rules of the United Nations and ST/SGB/Organization/Annex of 1 June 1976.

8. The current situation at ESCWA regarding the languages used in the preparation of ESCWA documents and publications is shown in tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1
Use of languages in the preparation of documents at the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

	Actual for 1998-1999					
	Drafted		*Translated*		*Published*	
	Documents	*Pages*	*Documents*	*Pages*	*Documents*	*Pages*
Arabic	107	3 608	92	2 788	199	6 396
English	146	8 271	61	991	207	9 262
French	-	-	1	25	1	25
Total	**253**	**11 879**	**154**	**3 804**	**407**	**15 683**

	Estimated for 2000-2001					
	Drafted		*Translated*		*Published*	
	Documents	*Pages*	*Documents*	*Pages*	*Documents*	*Pages*
Arabic	130	3 211	100	4 802	230	8 013
English	160	8 143	63	1 100	223	8 243
French	-	-	2	49	2	49
Total	**290**	**11 354**	**165**	**5 951**	**455**	**17 305**

	Anticipated for 2002-2003					
	Drafted		*Translated*		*Published*	
	Documents	*Pages*	*Documents*	*Pages*	*Documents*	*Pages*
Arabic	118	3 400	96	3 800	214	7 200
English	150	8 200	62	1 000	212	9 200
French	-	-	1	25	1	25
Total	**268**	**11 600**	**159**	**4 825**	**427**	**16 425**

Table 2
Ratio of use of languages in the preparation of documents at the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
(Percentage, based on number of pages)

	1998-1999			*2000-2001**			*2002-2003**		
	Drafted	*Translated*	*Published*	*Drafted*	*Translated*	*Published*	*Drafted*	*Translated*	*Published*
Arabic	30	73	41	28	81	46	29	79	44
English	70	26	59	72	18	53	71	21	56
French	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

* Estimated.

9. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia is an international organization at which not all staff write in Arabic. For many Arabic-speaking staff, the working languages used during their studies and earlier career may have been languages other than Arabic, and it is often easier for them to write in those languages. Moreover, most of the references and resources, especially those accessed via the Internet, are not in Arabic. Further, ESCWA has to coordinate its activities with organizations both in and outside the United Nations system that do not use Arabic. This explains why only the minority of output produced by ESCWA was in Arabic. Following an evaluation exercise conducted in the biennium 1998-1999, ESCWA became more aware of the language issue and has tried to encourage staff to write in Arabic, to decrease the number of publications drafted in English so as to facilitate and reduce the time necessary for translation, and to produce an executive summary in Arabic for publications issued in English and vice versa. In doing so, ESCWA has opted to outsource translation into Arabic since the prevailing market rates are lower than the cost of permanent staff. ESCWA has recently launched its Arabic web site and intends to develop it further to include all of its non-sale publications and the Arabic summaries.

10. In accordance with existing practice, requirements for documents and languages of drafting, translation and publication at ESCWA have been defined for each biennium on the basis of a number of factors, including the target audience and the end-users. For instance, the original language of a study is determined by the source materials and references and by the language capabilities of the individuals concerned.

11. Since the biennium 1998-1999, the number of established posts, 6 for translation (3 Arabic P-3 translators, 2 Arabic P-4 revisers, 1 English P-4 self-reviser) and 3 for editing (1 Arabic P-3 and 2 English (P-4 and P-3)), has remained the same. Outsourcing has been used only during the periods in which the workload exceeded the capacity of in-house Arabic and English translators and revisers.

12. There have been increases in requirements for contractual services and/or temporary assistance in both Arabic translation and English editing and translation. The main cause of the increase — in addition to unplanned requests — is the imbalance over time in the distribution of the work programme over the two years of each biennium and the historical tendency for documentation output to be

concentrated in the second half of the second year of the biennium, which then becomes the peak period for conference services, sometimes even necessitating the carrying forward of a substantial translation workload to the next biennium. During peak periods, and in order for ESCWA to meet performance deadlines, in-house Arabic translators and revisers have traditionally edited documents drafted in Arabic. This diversion of their energy usually results in some postponement or outsourcing of translation work.

13. The application of the conference services workload standards which, on the recommendation of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, were revised in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001[4] and approved by the General Assembly in its resolution 54/249 of 23 December 1999, to the data contained in table 1 above, could result in the conclusion that the low ratio of documents and publications issued in Arabic at ESCWA is not related to its conference servicing capacity or to a lack of resources, but rather to the drafting and usage practices followed by the Commission and its secretariat.

14. Table 3 below shows the approximate number of translators' workdays and work-months resulting from the application of the established workload standards to the number of translated pages indicated in table 1.

Table 3
Number of translators' workdays and work-months necessary for the translation of pages indicated in table 1

	1998-1999			*2000-2001**			*2002-2003**		
	Days	*Months*	*Number of posts*	*Days*	*Months*	*Number of posts*	*Days*	*Months*	*Number of posts*
Arabic	662	29	1.2	1 141	50	2.1	903	39	44
English	235	10	0.4	261	11	0.5	238	10	56
French	6	-	-	12	-	-	-	-	-
Total	**904**	**39**	**1.6**	**1 414**	**61**	**2.6**	**1 146**	**50**	**2.1**

* Estimated.

15. Based on the standards, it is estimated that the capacity of ESCWA for the preparation of documents and publications in working languages of the Commission is currently adequate, while any shortfalls owing to uneven submission of workload over time are addressed through the use of temporary assistance and contractual services.

16. In general, the current situation with regard to ESCWA documents and publications indicates that about 30 per cent of recurrent and non-recurrent publications are drafted in Arabic, while 41 to 46 per cent of documents are published in Arabic and 53 to 59 per cent in English. However, taking into account the provisions of Commission resolutions 20 (II) and 44 (IV), this situation has prompted the adoption of the following remedial measures at ESCWA:

(a) Author divisions have been requested to adhere strictly to the page limits for documents, as established by the General Assembly and the Secretary-General.

Flexibility may be exercised with regard to publications, as appropriate. This enables the Conference Services Section at ESCWA to translate a greater number of documents;

(b) Efforts are made to encourage staff members with comparative advantage in either Arabic or English to prepare their work in that language;

(c) In order to guarantee the simultaneous distribution of documents in both Arabic and English or to maintain only a short time lag between their distribution, a schedule of phased submission of documents to the Conference Services Section in the course of the biennium is maintained in order to avoid sharp temporary increases in the workload and to discourage unforeseen additions to the planned conference services programme. Only when all other possibilities have been exhausted does ESCWA resort to outsourcing translation work.

IV. Conclusion

17. **The provisions of the resolutions and decisions of intergovernmental bodies relating to the control and limitation of documentation, including Economic and Social Council resolutions 1979/1 of 9 February 1979, 1979/41 of 10 May 1979 and 1979/69 of 2 August 1979, and General Assembly resolutions 32/71 of 9 December 1977, 33/56 of 14 December 1978, 34/50 of 23 November 1979, 35/10 A of 3 November 1980, 36/117 of 10 December 1981 and 38/32 of 25 November 1983, as well as the costs incurred for regular staff, temporary assistance and contractual services for the translation, editing and publication of documents have been reviewed and, without sacrificing basic quality, the most cost-effective solution has been selected.**

18. **The drafting and translation capacity of ESCWA for the preparation of documents and publications in Arabic appears to be adequate. However, there is room for improvement in regard to the proportion of documents and publications issued in Arabic. ESCWA has taken steps to encourage staff to prepare their drafts in Arabic, to increase the number of documents and publications translated into Arabic and to reduce the time needed for translation.**

19. **The Secretary-General intends to monitor the situation closely and will report on the progress achieved in the production of documents and publications in Arabic in the context of his proposed programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005.**

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-sixth Session, Supplement No. 16* (A/56/16), para. 244.

[2] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, Fifty-ninth Session, Supplement No. 11* (E/5658), chap. III.

[3] See ibid., *Sixty-third Session, Supplement No. 10* (E/5969), chap. III.

[4] See *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 6* (A/54/6/Rev.1), vol. II: *Expenditure sections 1 to 15*, part I, table 2.45.